Lake Huron Citizens
Fishery Advisory Committee

Established by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to improve and maintain fishery resources of Lake Huron through better communication and partnership.

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee (LHCFAC)
RAM Center, Roscommon, Michigan
Monday, January 14, 2013
Approved

Attendees: Jim Baker, Dan Blough, Dave Borgeson, Dave Clapp, Jim DeClerck, Larry Desloover, Ed Eisch, Neal Godby, Todd Grischke, Dennis Gulau, Tom Hamilton, Charlie Heins, Lindsey Henski, Jim Johnson, Tom Keerl, Rick Kretzschmar, Frank Krist, Terry Lyons, Ken Merckel, Craig Milkowski, William Olar, Eric Plant, Ken Pletcher, Bob Reider, Ed Retherford, Brandon, Schroeder, Steve Sendek, Dana Serafin, Jerry Serafin, Julie Shafto, Steve Shafto, Chuck Shaver, Fred Sterns, Aaron Switzer, Forest Williams

Welcome and Opening Comments:

Frank Krist called the meeting to order. Attendees introduced themselves. Todd Grischke acknowledged the outstanding partner award presented to Frank at the December Fisheries Division training.

Scale analysis provides clues to where many of the steelhead in Lake Huron are originating – Jim Johnson:

The Fisheries Division has obtained a vast amount of steelhead scale samples from Lake Huron each year since 2001 and we are analyzing catch data using scale analysis. When steelhead are being raised in a hatchery the scale growth rings are more uniformly spaced than the growth rings on scales of wild fish. This results from more uniform temperatures in hatcheries compared to the more extreme temperatures endured by wild fish. Usually, colder water results in slower growth. Examining the patterns of the steelhead scale rings provides an estimation of the percent of wild fish caught each year. These data indicate that the percent of wild fish produced in Lake Huron from 2001 through 2006 averaged about 18%, from 2007 through 2009 averaged about 34% and from 2010 through 2011 averaged about 58% were wild.

The analysis of the scale data from the steelhead indicate how often the fish spawned. The results showed that 72.4% of the caught fish did not spawn, 17.9% spawned once, 8.1% spawned twice, 1.4% spawned three times and 0.1% spawned 4 times. Of those steelhead that spawned at least once, 34.9% were repeat spawners.

There has been an incredible rise in catch rate of steelhead per hour (a record level not seen before). That leads us to question what could have caused this trend. And if the population is increasing, do we have the food for these fish to survive? The average weight at various ages of the steelhead in Lake Huron are less than the average weight of steelhead in Lake Michigan. This does not appear to be density related. The steelhead in Lake Michigan have available additional larger prey like alewives to eat which increases growth rates. In Lake Huron, steelhead eat smaller food items including a significant amount of insects and other invertebrates. Steelhead are opportunistic feeders and will readily eat food items of various sizes on the surface, midwater and bottom. This enabled them to survive well after the food web changes occurred in Lake Huron.

The table below shows the average weight of steelhead at various ages in Lakes Michigan and Huron from 2007 through 2011.

Age	Lake Michigan Weight	Lake Huron Weight
2	4.2	3.3
3	6.0	4.8
4	7.4	5.7
5	8.2	6.4
6	8.6	7.0
7	9.9	7.7

Why the rise in catch rate?

- Increasing reproduction since 2006 - YES
- Both wild & stocked fish contributing - YES
- Adequate prey supply - YES
- Reduced competition from Chinook – MAYBE
- Cormorant control and hazing – MAYBE
- Smaller, fewer walleyes in recent years – MAYBE
- Cessation of fin clipping (stress) - MAYBE
- Acclimation pens - NO

Why the rise in reproduction?

- Alewife collapse resulting in the rise of egg thiamine - YES
- Diminished competition for food by alewives and large smelt – YES
- Reduced competition from Chinook salmon in streams – Probably not
- Reduced predation on steelhead from Chinook – MAYBE
- More favorable temperature and increased precipitation/stream flow – MAYBE

So what is next?

- The 2002 scale data were not available originally so add to the creel biological data base (Tracy Kolb working on it)
- Add 2012 harvest and scale analysis to the database
- Summarize reproduction by ***year class*** in addition to ***harvest year*** (better view of which years produced highest reproduction rates)
- Report by summer 2013

Status of the splake in Northern Lake Huron – Neal Godby:

The only Lake Huron plant of splake takes place in the Les Cheneaux Islands at Hessel. These are fertile hybrids of lake trout and brook trout which grow quickly and reach maturity in about 3 years. Splake live to at least 9 years and grow quicker than either parent. Because their characteristics are intermediate, the only definitive way to identify a splake from a lake trout is to kill it and count the pyloric caeca. That is the reason splake regulations mirror those of the very similar appearing lake trout.

About 30,000 yearling splake have been stocked consistently in the Les Cheneaux Islands since 1992. Harvest has been reasonably stable but consistently low at around 100 fish each year. Return to creel averaged 0.33% - 0.5%. The zone MH-1, which extends from Rogers City to Drummond Island, is managed for lake trout harvest under regulations of the 2000 Great Lakes Tribal/State/US Consent Decree. Since splake must be included in the lake trout regulations, splake are typically unavailable during the winter when

the most productive fishing occurs because the lake trout season is closed at this time. The splake are most readily available to the anglers very early in the season and during the winter through the ice. Can we address this to improve our splake fishery by expanding the season? Can splake be marked so that they can be identified without killing them? Other concerns include, stocking 30,000 fish per year at a cost of $72,600 dollars with a limited return, splake are fertile and provide a potential for genetic issues with cross breeding with lake trout, limited hatchery space. Therefore, does it make sense to keep stocking splake?

With the current low return to creel, the approximate cost per fish harvested is about $700. There are many dollars going into this project and perhaps it is time to evaluate if the harvest can be improved with changes in regulations or the efforts should be redirected. Todd Grischke will present an issue statement on the splake fishery at a future meeting. There was concern that the cost was high per fish but it was mentioned that the overall picture should be evaluated to see if there is a significant benefit to the economy. It was also mentioned that the plant works but some adjustments may be needed. The fish are surviving and are present to be caught but the current regulation prevents the maximum potential harvest.

A discussion of the low water levels in Lake Huron – Todd Grischke:

Low water levels will be an issue on the top of our list to deal with over the next year. We are heading towards the lowest water levels ever recorded. The December Lake Huron/Lake Michigan water level was broken by about a half inch. Environmentally, it is not just a Lake Huron issue but also an entire Great Lakes Basin concern.

Todd Grischke showed a presentation by Mollie Mahoney, US Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District, titled 'Great Lakes Navigation system dredging update'. The fiscal year 2013 dredging requirements indicated 139 federal harbors with dredging needs; only 15 were funded (6 in Michigan, with 2 on Lake Huron).

DEQ Office of the Great Lakes has been appointed as the lead agency for State of Michigan. A report is due in February/March. Jim Goodhart is the lead representative.

There was a discussion that the low water levels in many of the harbors and launch sites along much of the Michigan shoreline of Lake Huron will make it difficult or impossible to launch boats in April. One of the Committee Advisors traveled from Lexington to the Northern Saginaw Bay. He reported that there is much work to be done and in some locations launching a boat may impossible.

Todd mentioned that he will be contacting representatives from the US Corp of Engineers, MDNR Waterways Commission, the Office of Great Lakes and possibly others to attend the next Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee meeting scheduled for Tuesday April 16, 2013. At least 2 hours will be reserved for this discussion since pressure is mounting and if nothing is done by spring the negative impacts to the State's economy could be substantial.

MDNR Fisheries Management and Law Enforcement updates:

Todd Grischke, Lake Huron Basin Coordinator
Fisheries Division's 'Strategic Plan' is available online and can be reviewed and comments provided at the following link, http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10364-292572--,00.html. Within the Department, we are putting together workgroups to work on and finalize the plan. A final draft is expected around February 2013.

We saw EEDV virus at the Marquette Hatchery. This resulted in mortality of 70,000-80,000 lake trout (25% of production). This lose will affect spring plants. This disease is believed to be associated with warm weather or drought (or both). This disease is specific to lake trout.

Dave Clapp, Acting Research Section Manager
Dave is acting Research Section Manager since Tammy Newcomb transferred to assisting the DNR Director on fishery matters. Dave is working out of the Charlevoix Research Station on Federal grants and reports. Also, he is working to get the inactive Hunt Creek and Saline Research stations back on line.

Ed Eisch, Manager of the Oden/Platte River/Harrietta State Fish Hatcheries
At all three facilities, the fish are hatched and are looking good including the browns, rainbows and Atlantic salmon. Things are on schedule for what looks like an early stocking this spring. There are approximately 100,000 yearling Atlantic salmon that are healthy and will be ready to stock this spring as long as nothing unforeseen happens.

Jim Baker, Southern Lake Huron Management Supervisor
There are discussions occurring about an earlier season opener for sucker dip netting. Because of the warmer springs much of the sucker run is being missed with the current regulations. Previously the date could only be changed by the legislature; however, a law was passed recently that gave the authority to establish the date back to the DNR. Walleye season ends March 15, and we do not want that time to overlap therefore, the new date will be between March 15 and April 1. Saginaw Bay shoreline ice fishing is underway with good perch fishing on the early ice until the crowds came out. Since the fish school in very shallow water under the ice shelf the noise from the crowds dispersed the fish. Jim stressed that the motorcycle helmet law does not apply to ORVs and a helmet is required by everyone riding on the machines.

Dave Borgeson, Northern Lake Huron Management Supervisor
Biologist/Technicians are working on 2013 work plans and survey schedules, prescriptions, etc. The St. Mary's River joint survey as part of the St. Mary's Assessment Plan is taking place this year. Upcoming events include the Black Lake sturgeon season, spring Inland Waterway walleye movement study, population estimates on Black Lake sturgeon and assessment of hatchery produced sturgeon survival.

Craig Milkowski, Law Enforcement Division, Commercial Fish Specialist
Craig has worked with the Coast Guard training them on commercial fishing regulations and an overview of the fishery. In addition, Craig is conducting training with the Michigan State Police Motor Carrier Divisions to educate and train them on Aquatic Invasive Species. Homeland Security has been out on Lake Huron regarding the mystery boats which get reported occasionally.

Finalizing the Atlantic salmon new stocking locations priority list – Todd Grischke:

An updated draft of the 'Recommended Strategy for Stocking Atlantic Salmon in Lake Huron in 2013' was distributed. After discussion, the final version will contain the priorities as listed below.

1. The St. Mary's River will receive sufficient Atlantic salmon so that the number stocked by LSSU and the State will total 50,000 yearlings.
2. The Au Sable River will receive 30,000 yearlings (a minimum stocking level of 15,000 is recommended).
3. The St. Mary's River will receive an additional 15,000 yearlings.
4. The Thunder Bay River will receive 20,000 yearlings (a minimum stocking level of 15,000 is recommended).
5. A Great Lakes Port (i.e. Lexington, Port Sanilac) in Southern Lake Huron will receive up to 15,000 spring yearlings.

6. The St. Mary's River may receive additional yearlings if needed up to a maximum of 100,000 (this total would include both the State and Lake Superior State University stocked yearlings). The 100,000 yearling amount is not a target but the maximum that is permitted by an agreement under the State/Tribal Fishing Decrees.

NOTE: Spring yearlings will be stocked in Torch Lake at prescribed levels of 16,200 to 18,000 only if fall fingerlings were not stocked the previous fall.

It was discussed which Southern Lake Huron Port would best to accommodate an initial stocking of Atlantic salmon. Lexington Harbor was suggested as it has more piers open to anglers than Port Sanilac which has mostly private docks and piers. In addition, Lexington receives more fishing pressure.

There was a short discussion about other potential stocking sites when Atlantic salmon production increases and additional sites may be needed. It was mentioned that the Rifle River is a good candidate because of acceptable temperatures, good habitat and much public access. Other sites mentioned were Cheboygan River, Ocqueoc River, Swan River Weir and other harbors. The Atlantic salmon stocked at the new sites in 2013 will begin to appear in the fishery in 2014 so much should be learned within a few years. As this new information is compiled and production increases better decisions can be made about adding additional stocking sites in the future.

In order to determine if stocking of each new site is a success, an acceptable rate of return needs to be established. Currently, Atlantic salmon stocked in the St. Mary's River return about 5% to the anglers. Since the eggs of the Atlantic salmon in the St. Mary's River are collected, raised and released at the same location it is not likely that survival of the fish raised in the State hatcheries will survive as well so a return to anglers of 2% was suggested as a reasonable "Benchmark of Success". A stocking site will be considered successful if anglers catch at least 2% of the number stocked at that location. Consideration will be given that the fish travel throughout Lake Huron and not all the fish will be caught at the site where they are stocked.

We currently have about 100,000 Atlantic salmon yearlings that are surviving well at the Platte River State Hatchery and this priority stocking plan needs to have a final approval soon so that the fish can be planted before any stressors develop. These are larger fish and when warm water hits we need to move them out.

The group also discussed the marking effort for Atlantic salmon. All the fish were marked this year and many of the fish were able to go through the mass marking trailer. Unfortunately, some of the fish were too BIG and had to be marked by hand. The adipose fin was removed from each fish but no coded wire tags were used for this year. The fish tolerated the marking process extremely well and there were no mortalities.

It was stressed that avian predation control efforts need to be coordinated with Atlantic salmon plants. The DNR needs to make sure the avian predator list gets updated once the stocking sites are finalized.

Since the Atlantic salmon start showing up in the creel early in April and can be caught through November there was interest in the possibility of extending the creel survey season. Depending on funding, this option may be considered.

A discussion of the format and number of the Lake Huron Spring Sea Grant Workshops to be held and an introduction to the new report on Sustainable Coastal Tourism Development in Northeastern Michigan – Brandon Schroeder:

Sustainable Coastal Tourism Development Report

Laura Johnson (through her Masters Degree) and Brandon authored a coastal tourism report, 'Sustainable Coastal Tourism'. The report provides many resources, tools, suggestions and links for anyone interested in

developing tourism opportunities and businesses along the Great Lakes. This report has been shared with legislatures and you can view this report at http://www.nemcog.org/downloads/sustainablecoastaltourism_101012.pdf.

Lake Huron Spring Sea Grant Workshops
The Committee finds these workshops extremely valuable and is interested in coordinating these meetings with Brandon. Last year, Sea Grant hosted three evening workshops with attendance averaging 70 participants per workshop.

For 2013, Sea Grant is going to host three, three hour, evening workshops. They will be in Ubly on April 18, Alpena, and Cedarville. The dates, agendas and speakers will be arranged soon.

Potential Topics of Interest – Identification of Atlantic salmon, splake management directions (Cedarville), walleye movement (Dave Fielder), prey base, general changes on Lake Huron, Department finances, Fisheries Division Strategic Plan, water levels (bring experts in to talk about great lakes hydrology), lake trout movement (Ji He), final conclusions of the predator diet study and steelhead.

Turning Point will be used again in 2013. Brandon will work with Todd Grischke, Dave Borgeson, Jim Baker and Frank Krist to develop some turning point questions.

Can the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee be Improved: Everyone

The Committee discussed location and format. As background, the RAM Center charges an a.m. fee, lunch, and a p.m. fee. We could reduce that by meeting in the afternoon without lunch. Other options include the Grayling Township Hall, which only charges a $10 flat fee. The Doherty Hotel in Clare waives all fees as long as the Committee eats lunch on-site. BJ's Restaurant in Gaylord also waives all fees, if the committee eats on-site.

The Committee agreed to meet at the Doherty Hotel for the April 16 meeting. All attendees will pay for their own lunch.

Next Meetings:
Tuesday April 16 – Revised from previous April 17 date
Tuesday June 25
Tuesday Oct 15

Adjourned